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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0024
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 000401

SIPDIS

STATE DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: THREE FACES OF TAJIKISTAN'S SUNNI LEADERSHIP

REF: DUSHANBE 290

CLASSIFIED BY: Tracey A. Jacobson , Ambassador, EXEC, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: EmbOffs have reached out to more of Tajikistan's imams to get their impressions of religious life in Tajikistan and perceptions of the United States. The dissatisfaction voiced by Tajikistan's increasingly popular independent imams, as described in reftel, appears to be shared by many other imams. The government, however, continues to perpetuate the fiction that it can control what imams say and think. The imams we met ranged from strict adherence to the government's policy, to ignoring it. All of the imams share a common goal - to keep the country stable. However, they express deep concerns about the course the government has set. End Summary.

¶2. (C) From March 10-12, EmbOffs spoke to imams in Dushanbe and in Sughd to expand on the issues we reported on in reftel. Three imams emerged who probably typify the state of the Islamic leadership in Tajikistan. One imam fully supports the government's religious policy, and toes the line in the same way that secular officials do. An independent imam ignores and, in some cases, opposes the government's policy. A third imam attempts to comply with government requirements, but also recognizes the untenable situation he is in.

THE GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRAT

¶3. (C) Qobiljon Boev, the senior religious official at Dushanbe's Central Mosque, is the prototype of the government-compliant imam. In addition to his duties at the mosque, he is a member of the Council of Ulamo and a relative of the Council's Chairman. During a meeting with PolOff on March 10, he deferred excessively to the positive role of government in religious life, invoking "his excellency President Rahmon" multiple times. He said that "our government is our father, and we are its children; if a child misbehaves, the father must beat him."

¶4. (C) Boev gave PolOff details about how the government attempts to control imams. For example, Boev and other Council of Ulamo members prepare sets of sermons. They then send the sermons to the Ministry of Culture, which in turn sends the

sermons to President Rahmon's Office. The presidential administration and Ministry of Culture edit the sermons, and go back and forth with the Council of Ulamo on which topics are appropriate to discuss. Once the sermons are completed, the Council distributes them to imams at all Friday praying mosques in Tajikistan by e-mail, post or fax. Boev said that this system was initiated by "his excellency," and that the sermons generally cover the historical aspects of religious figures or main tenets of Islam.

¶15. (C) Boev said most imams are happy to follow the Council's guidelines because they are "not well educated, and they need help writing sermons." Controls were necessary to prevent imams from straying from acceptable topics: "As long as religious figures do not touch sensitive issues, we will have no problems." He said Tajiks have a positive image of the United States, and that U.S. support for Israel is not an issue in which Tajiks would interfere.

¶16. (C) As reported in reftel, the crowds at Boev's mosque have declined over the years. Boev claimed that 7000 people - mostly between 20 and 50 - regularly attended Friday prayers; during trips to the mosque on Friday, however, EmbOffs never observed anywhere near that number. Amongst those who regularly attend Friday prayers is a group of Salafis. Boev fully supports the government's ban on the group, and is aware that they come to his mosque. He reasoned that it is not illegal for the Salafis to pray; it is merely illegal for them to exist as a group.

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THE INDEPENDENT AND CHARISMATIC FIGURE

¶17. (C) In very stark contrast to Boev, Domullo Numonkhon, the imam khatib of the Muhammad Iqbol Friday praying mosque in Istravshan (Sughd Region), is typical of the type of independent and increasingly popular imam we described in reftel. Numonkhon took up his position in 1996, with about 500 followers. When we visited him on March 11, he was supervising workmen putting the final touches on a huge new addition to his mosque - a cavernous building with space for 4000 worshippers. The crowds on Friday spill into the street, and once his new building is finished, he will start on yet another expansion that will double the capacity of the mosque. Worshippers and local businessmen are financing the construction, including the marble siding brought in from Iran.

¶18. (C) Like the imams we described in reftel, Numonkhon is committed to sidestepping - and in some cases fighting - government restrictions. He has angered local authorities because he "teaches people to think independently." Toeing the government line is senseless because "people have access to television or the internet, and they talk to each other." The government "expects" him to report to the imam khatib of the city's central mosque; in reality, Numonkhon has little if any contact with him. Numonkhon did not dodge questions about the United States' reputation like Boev did. Many Tajiks are upset with the United States because of Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel/Palestine, he said. The United States is a democracy internally, but many suffer because of its foreign policy.

¶19. (C) The Embassy will be sending Numonkhon to the United States on an International Visitor Leadership Program in May. Local officials told him that they could not issue him a

passport, however, unless he shaved his beard. Numonkhon told them that they could shave his beard "if you cut off my head." The situation was resolved when Numonkhon allowed the officials to use Photo Shop to crop much of his beard out of his picture.

THE RECONCILER

¶10. (C) We had anticipated that our meeting with Domullo Safokhon, the imam khatib of the central mosque in Isfara, and his deputy, Hoji Homidullo Karimov, would be similar to our meeting with Boev. Isfara is one of the most religious parts of the country, and imams at central mosques are more likely to toe the government line. However, Safokhon and Karimov were unusually frank with us. They tried to follow the guidelines of the Council of Ulamo; they dutifully distributed pre-prepared sermons to the district's nine Friday praying mosques.

¶11. (C) However, Karimov and Safokhon see themselves as peacemakers, attempting to avert problems that could be caused by the government's ill advised religious policy. Karimov said "we know the government's restrictions are creating problems." Referring to law enforcement officials' harsh methods to address extremism, he said "we are creating terrorists." Virtually every month, Safokhon brings imams and law enforcement officials in Isfara together to discuss relevant legal and religious issues. Karimov was skeptical about the future; as we were leaving the mosque, he said the new religion law (septel) will "cause instability."

HOLDING THE PLACE TOGETHER

¶12. (C) Comment: Talking to Boev was like talking to a government official. He used broad characterizations to support the government, and he either underestimated or willfully

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ignored the deep resentment that many imams feel toward the government's religious policies. We were surprised that he was so open when speaking with us; no government official would have given us this kind of information. We assume that he was simply not accustomed to speaking to foreign diplomats. While Boev was probably correct when he said that many of Tajikistan's imams were poorly educated, we think he was deluding himself that the government actually controlled what all imams said and did. We suspect that a large portion of Tajikistan's imams would agree with Numonkhon, Karimov, and Safokhon, all of whom expressed concern about the government's collision course with the religious community. End comment.

JACOBSON